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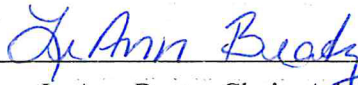
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ENGAGING THE PUBLIC THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

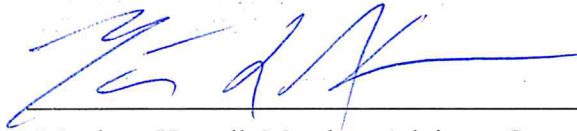
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ENGAGING THE PUBLIC THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
December, 2017

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, whose commitment to my success knows no bounds, and to my children whom I hope will endeavor to reach higher than any generation which came before them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Advisor/Instructor/Committee Chair, Dr. LeAnn Beaty, for her guidance and straightforward nature which has always spurred me to do better. I would also like to thank Dr. Matthew Howell, for his teachings during my time in the Masters of Public Administration Program and his patience during the construction of my thesis.

## ABSTRACT

The use of social media by government agencies to spur civic engagement is still a rather new concept, one whose purpose seems to have gotten lost in the excitement of the use of new technology. As a result, there is not an abundance of research into how social media can be used to promote civic engagement.

This paper will attempt to reveal how agencies are using social media as well as try to pinpoint what agencies should be doing. As an example of current procedures in our area this paper will highlight some local government entities in Boyle County, Kentucky and what they currently have in place regarding use of social media by their agencies. As there appears to be very little direction on this matter, potential issues that can affect the use of social media by future administrators will also be reviewed.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A primary focus of any public entity is to engage those stakeholders/citizens that it is working to serve. Community involvement is necessary to promote transparency, measure policy and promote trust. To accomplish these goals, government entities use several tools.

The most recent and popular tool is social media. Social media is defined as an online platform in which the user can create text, establish a digital persona, and engage in relationships or network with others (Magro, 2012). While social media is used widely by for-profit and nonprofit organizations to pass along information to citizens, it is unclear if social media facilitates community engagement or encourages the public to participate in or with the agency.

Although there are several social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc., this study will concentrate on Facebook as it is the most widely used social media site, not only by organizations but also by citizens. Many governmental agencies are, at a minimum, using Facebook to communicate events, warnings, and deadlines to their participants. This dissemination of information is important but cannot always be considered to be engagement. In Facebook, you can post, comment, share, and rate others' posts by liking or by the use of various other emoji's to express how an individual feels about a post. Each of these is a response elicited by a post made by the agency. Communication with the public is happening, but the question remains: What constitutes engagement?

Facebook is being used for community engagement, however there are several potential obstacles to the platform's use in this way. Among them are access to hardware or the internet itself. Approximately thirteen percent of the population either chooses not to use the internet or cannot afford internet access (Anderson & Perrin, 2016). Further, there are those that may have access to the internet but have never learned to use a computer, tablet or smart phone. Many of the elderly are beginning to use internet as

their source of information, but the use of physical papers is still strong in many communities.

The threat of not reaching as many citizens as possible is not the only thing these agencies need worry about. Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey states cyber security is a persistent concern (Ferdinando, 2015). The use of Facebook by an agency is a potential back door to a hacker. The threat of being hacked is a real concern for any organization. The data of a local library may not seem important to those outside the agency but is of great importance to the agency itself. A hacker can hold that data for ransom or delete it completely. Another local agency that may concern itself with a potential breach in data are those agencies involved in law enforcement. A back door into their computer network could reveal information regarding open investigations or even undercover officers.

The use of Facebook and other social media sites to engage stakeholders may not be as easy as setting up a Facebook page and starting to post information. A manager has several issues that should be addressed to ensure that the use of Facebook will lead to transparency, policy development and trust.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The use of social media to engage citizens is a concern for us all. Especially if social media is the only tool being used to meet the goal of civic engagement. The relationship between government and its citizenry is an unpredictable one. Since the founding of the United States, its citizens have been keeping a watchful eye on how the government transacts its business and is often critical of it. Getting informed and involved as a citizen allows those individuals to understand and potentially initiate change in policy. Being informed gives citizens a voice. Government policy affects everything citizens do regardless of their income, race, or religion. The government regulates or provides services and products that citizens use, consume or interact with, such as food, drugs, highways, and public schools. Information and participation gives the citizenry power.

Government agencies should be concerned with citizen participation as it fosters transparency, policy development and trust. Many agency managers may shy away from this type of interaction and it may leave them feeling exposed and imposed upon, although their agency will be better for it (Perlman, 2012).

The participation of citizens gives them a stronger voice in policy planning and implementation which allows developers/administrators to have a better understanding of what is needed by its future recipients. Masri and Rao (2013) state that this type of interaction “is expected to lead to better-designed development projects, more effective service delivery, and improvements in the targeting of benefits” (p. 15). Working together in this manner fosters a close relationship between the administrators and the beneficiaries. This relationship should lend itself to being able to tailor programs to fit the specific needs of their recipients and reduce waste and even fraud.

Participation can also strengthen a “pro-social thinking” society which may lead to self-sufficiency and social capital (Mansuri and Rao, 2013, p 16). This type of

empowerment can lead to any number of things, such as a reduction in crime, a decrease in social programs, a decline in poverty and even a greater sense of community or national pride.

The notion of “civic participation” is not a new concept but rather has been around as long as democracy itself. For example, in the time of Athenian democracy, every man who was also a citizen was allowed to voice his thoughts during public policy discussions (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). In the United States, traditional engagement is carried out in advocacy and volunteerism. Today, in the age of eGovernance, many government agencies are looking to social media to instigate participation. Agencies should concern themselves with measuring civic engagement to ensure that they are reaching the very individuals they seek to benefit. An agency cannot promote trust, transparency and citizen collaboration if it is not actually engaging its stakeholders. In order to measure civic engagement, an organization must first know how to recognize engagement.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines civic engagement as “any process that directly engages the public in decision-making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision” (Public Participation Guide, p 1). The EPA also advises that civic engagement is not a singular episode but rather a string of activity and actions taken by the agency to inform the public and instigate feedback from them which will be used over the lifetime of a project. That is not to say that every piece of feedback will be utilized, but rather the agency should take each into consideration and respond to feedback and advise the public of how decisions were made while taking their viewpoints into consideration (EPA, Public Participation Guide. 2017).

Technology has changed the way the government interacts with stakeholders. Electronic government is called e-government. At first e-government was simply the dissemination of information through agency internet sites. E-government then developed by allowing interaction between agencies and their stakeholders through electronic mail and electronic forms which allowed for a two-way flow of information. This then evolved by the ability to issue services through the internet. (Magro, 2012)

The government then introduced the idea of “open government” (a.k.a. Government 2.0). The Open Government Initiative called for “transparency,

participation, and collaboration” (Chun, Schulman, Sandoval & Hovy, 2010, p 2). This was to be accomplished by releasing reports regarding government actions and policies utilizing a rapid forum which would also allow for stakeholder feedback through forums such as social networking sites. The thought was to provide a service that can be accessed without travel and have the ability to distribute, collaborate, share, create and collect information at each government level in an attempt to be more democratic (e-democracy). Again, the intention of Government 2.0 is the engagement of stakeholders (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010).

## USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TODAY

It appears that social media does reach a significant amount of people in a very swift manner. According to the Social Media Update 2016, Pew Research Center, roughly eighty percent of internet users are using Facebook (Figure 1). That is fifty-six percentage points higher than Twitter; forty-eight percentage points higher than Instagram; and fifty-one percentage points higher than LinkedIn (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan, 2016).

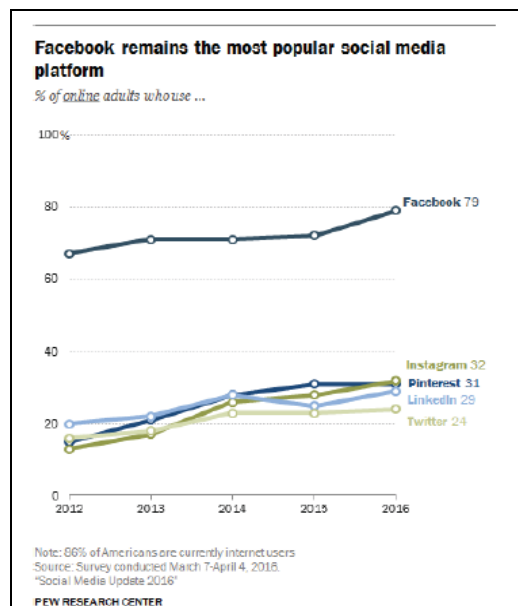


Figure 1. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform.

Source: Greenwood, S., Perrin, A., & Duggan, M. (2016). Social Media Update 2016. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/>



As Figure 1 shows, the use of Facebook as compared to other social media networking sites is the logical choice for mass dissemination of information. However, in order to truly have engagement, there has to be some type of response from stakeholders and then a further reply by the agency. The mere posting of information is not enough to qualify for community engagement.

In 2016, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the Center for Urban Innovation at Arizona State University and the Alliance for Innovation published the Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government 2016 Survey (Figure 2). One of the topics of the survey was public engagement. Over fifty-three percent of participants (local governments) relayed a rather small amount of stakeholder engagement.

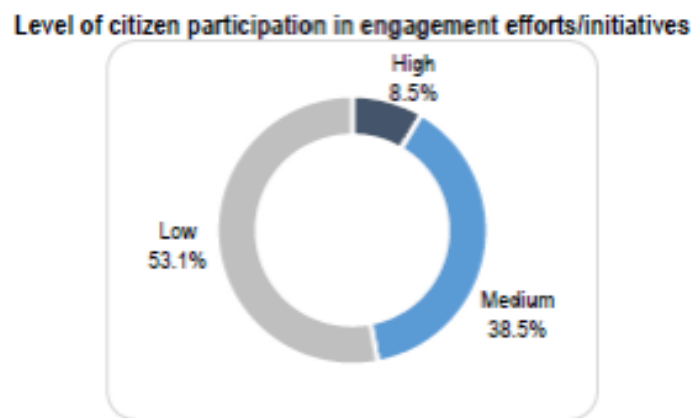


Figure 2. Level of citizen participation in engagement efforts/initiatives.

Source: Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government 2016 Survey Summary (2016). *International City/County Management Association*. Retrieved from [https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068\\_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf](https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf)

Although “town hall meetings” are still the apparatus which experiences most success, social media was listed in the “Top 5” at sixty-four percent (Figure 3).

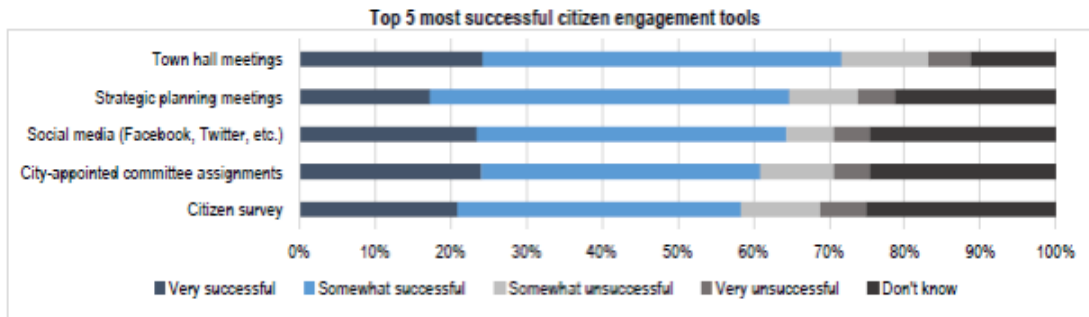


Figure 3. Top 5 most successful citizen engagement tools.

Source: Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government 2016 Survey Summary (2016). *International City/County Management Association*. Retrieved from [https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068\\_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf](https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf)

Although participation is low in these communities, the survey does show that social media can be used to spur participation. This community's low participation numbers may signal that the citizenry does not view social media as a viable tool for civic participation. The citizenry may no longer be engaging with local governments on social media as the relevant agencies are not responding and/or tracking their responses.

When asked "How important to your local government are the following goals of public participation?" (Figure 4) thirty-nine percent felt it was important to educate citizens about issues; thirty-seven percent obtain feedback regarding citizens' understanding of issues; thirty-nine percent engage citizens to understand and consider goals and issues; thirty-seven percent utilize citizens in developing alternate, preferable solutions and decision-making; twenty-three percent actually put decision-making with the citizens; and only thirty-four percent obtain feedback from even a small section of their citizens (International City/County Management Association, 2016).

14. How important to your local government are the following goals of public participation? (If your local government does not have a particular goal, check "Not applicable")

	n	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Important	Highly important	Not applicable
a. Provide the public with objective information to assist them in understanding problems/solutions/alternatives.	536	0.7%	3.9%	10.8%	39.4%	35.6%	9.5%
b. Obtain feedback from the public on analyses of problems/solutions/alternatives.	534	1.3%	6.7%	20.6%	37.3%	22.8%	11.2%
c. Work directly with the public to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	536	0.7%	3.2%	17.5%	39.7%	29.7%	9.1%
d. Partner with the public in development of alternatives, identification of the preferred solution, and decision making.	534	1.5%	9.7%	21.7%	37.3%	18.9%	10.9%
e. Place decision making in the hands of the public.	529	14.4%	23.3%	20.0%	14.9%	4.3%	23.1%
f. Hear input/ideas from a broad cross-section of residents.	535	1.1%	5.8%	15.5%	34.4%	33.5%	9.7%

Figure 4. How important to our government are the following goals of public participation?

Source: Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government 2016 Survey Summary (2016). *International City/County Management Association*. Retrieved from [https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068\\_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf](https://icma.org/sites/default/files/309068_ICMA%20Innovation%20Survey%20Summary%20Report.pdf)

Overall, less than half of these local governments consider what the public has to say as "important". This is a clear indication of the breakdown in how local agencies see participation.

Unlike that of other government organizations, the use of social media by emergency preparedness agencies seems to be more of a success story. In the 2010 International City/County Management Association Report: A New Way to Communicate with Residents: Local Government Use of Social Media to Prepare for Emergencies; emergency preparedness agencies were not only able to inform citizens of eminent danger but also able to use their feedback to gauge how that event is affecting various areas of the community which helped in the disbursement of personnel and other assets. For example, The City of Alexandria, VA, Office of Communications has developed a plan to use their citizenry as "eyes and ears on the ground," to address the constantly evolving challenges that snow presents (Chavez, Repas, & Stefaniak, 2010, p 7). The report concludes that this system "demonstrated that the city cared for all citizens and was working to respond directly to their concerns and reports" thus fostering a true relationship with those they are trying to benefit (Chavez, Repas, & Stefaniak, 2010, p 7). However, this type of collaboration between the agency and the citizen is more about effectuating an operation versus actual administration (Perlman, 2012). Many of the agencies that utilize social media are seeking a collaboration with citizens for administrative purposes.

An analysis of the agencies in Boyle County, Kentucky revealed that they are more in an administrative than operational role, with the exception of law enforcement which seems to be a hybrid of both. An administrative role is one of simply providing information as well as assisting with the administration of a program. An operational role is one of action such as those provided by law enforcement or emergency agencies. The public entities reviewed are using Facebook to post information about their programs, to announce upcoming events, and in some cases to ask citizens to provide information to them. The one-way communication of a majority of these agencies' use of social media sites does not constitute civic engagement.

When we think of government agencies we think of procedures and regulations. However, none of these local agencies has an actual policy or guidelines on the use of social media. Without these guidelines many of the agencies do not concern themselves with what constitutes proof of citizen engagement. The lack of guidance led this research to other issues that the use of Facebook can lead to, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and security. These issues are potential pitfalls of an agency which uses Facebook or other social media sites without understanding how to institute policy on the use of this technology which can be potentially damaging to their agency.

The U.S. Government Center for Technology in Government attempts to give instruction on the use of social media sites by government entities. It does not mention how to track, use, or analyze the feedback obtained through such sites to further citizenry engagement (Perlman, 2012). The research conducted in Boyle County, Kentucky, revealed those local agencies do not have a policy or any guidance in place to spur citizen participation in a meaningful way through their use of social media. Perlman (2012), further states, "...in these 'important respects' of state and local government - citizen engagement and participation, policy input, elections, and representation; the stuff of local governance if not government - where SMS has not played a noteworthy role." (p 73) Perlman asks how we can use social media sites in such a manner as to engage our citizens. The EPA has a firm grasp on what it takes to utilize social media for the purposes of civic engagement as their guidelines address issues such as importance of stakeholder involvement, why stakeholder participation is important, the need to attend to

those “vulnerable populations and marginalized communities” and plans for engagement (EPA, 2017, p 4).

The ICMA guidelines for use of social media also indicate that an entity should have some type of policy that assists in the determination of objectives such as the need to obtain stakeholder’s views (ICMA Guideline, 2012). This exchange on Facebook would consist of the organizations post, a stakeholder comment in response to the post, and then a potential reply to their comment. A traceable exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, many organizations are not eliciting a stakeholder comment or are failing to respond when a stakeholder does leave a comment which validly raises a questions, concern, or idea.

Many scholars of public administration seem to have faith that the use of social media will result in citizen engagement. However, there are a few skeptics who believe that these learned individuals have their heads in the clouds. Dr. Lori A. Brainard, of Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, George Washington University sees these individuals as “Internet Utopians” (Brainard, 2016, p 459). It is her belief that while many are looking to new internet technology and social networking sites to bring about civic engagement, the new formats are falling short of hitting their mark.

While it appears that there is very little agreement on whether or not citizenry participation is on the rise or decline, it is obvious that citizens are attempting to interact with their government through social media (Brainard, 2016). According to a 2013 Pew Research study on Civic Engagement In the Digital Age (Figure 5), sixty-six percent of social networking site users utilized these sites to partake in some form of online civic activity (p 3).

### Political engagement on social networking sites

60% of American adults use social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter; these are some of the civic behaviors they have taken part in on these sites:

	% of SNS users who have done this	% of all adults who have done this
"Like" or promote material related to political/social issues that others have posted	38%	23%
Encourage other people to vote	35	21
Post your own thoughts/comments on political or social issues	34	20
Repost content related to political/social issues	33	19
Encourage others to take action on political/social issues that are important to you	31	19
Post links to political stories or articles for others to read	28	17
Belong to a group that is involved in political/social issues, or working to advance a cause	21	12
Follow elected officials, candidates for office or other public figures	20	12
<b>Total who said yes to any of the activities listed above</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>39%</b>

Figure 5. Political engagement on social networking sites.

Source: Smith, A. (2013). Civic Engagement in the Digital Age. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>

Although there appears to be a line of belief that public administrators are to implement regulations objectively, there is still optimism that those same managers will step up and use social media sites to spur civic participation by creating an atmosphere of joint venture (Brainard, 2016). However, the rules and regulations that guide administrative managers in their internet use are ambiguous. There does not seem to be much to lead managers to put forward best practices to promote engagement.

After her review of many different studies, Dr. Brainard concludes that it is clear that current use of social media sites by government agencies is not spurring civic engagement as they have not undertaken to have an actual conversations with their online stakeholders. The current use of these sites is one of information only, as countless responses by stakeholders go unanswered by administrators. Although not the intended result, it does appear that the data posted online does spur some offline engagement (Brainard, 2016).

## GAUGING INTERACTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Research and guidelines on the use of social media, specifically to spur civic engagement is minute. This is further complicated by the various ways administrators and/or scholars see the use of social media by government agencies. However, there are a few organizations that are trying to fill in the blanks.

One such agency is the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). They have released a guide to social media for local government. While this guide gives advice such as what platform to use and what benefits are had from the use of social media, and ways it can be used, the most interesting portion is the recommended tracking of data created by the use of social media.

ICMA admits that assessing your results is still a fluent undertaking. Nonetheless, it is recommended that an agency identify and document the following categories such as followers, reposts, discussions, and share counts. It further gauges stakeholder participation on Facebook by breaking down and analyzing the total “likes” and “comments” received during a specific timeframe or during a special event to determine the agency's influence. A review of the content that was “liked” and the “comments” made is also beneficial in gleaning how stakeholders feel about the agency's post(s) (International City/County Management Association, 2012).

Another method for tracking the responses to a post or comment is through Facebook Audience Insights which is provided by Facebook. This program collects and organizes various pieces of information such as the “likes” received, number of people reached, and comments. The tool will place these interactions in a ready-made report for the agency's review (Facebook, 2017).

Even with these potential tools to track and prove up civic engagement, it still appears that many agencies are failing to fully engage stakeholders through social media.

## LACK OF ENGAGING

Along with the failure to provide proper policy on internet use for citizen engagement, there are other reasons why administrators are failing to engage their

stakeholders through the use of social media such as cost, citizen reaction and lack of guidance through research.

Although there does not seem to be a common thought regarding the expense of utilizing social media, it stands to reason that if there is a large amount of responses received that it would take a lot to process that information. It may be that processing would be too costly in money and time (Brainard, 2016). I do not believe this to be an insurmountable factor. Obviously, the size and budget of any given agency is based on the size of the population they serve. Therefore, I believe it is well within the ability of a small local government to respond to the online postings of their stakeholders. By the same token, a larger entity should be able to provide for a department or section which would not only respond to online posts but also relay those findings to their superiors.

Another outcome of administrators failing to interact with citizens' posts is the annoyance of citizens. Should an entity's social media site advertise that they are interested in collaborating but fail to actually collaborate, it could leave citizens feeling let down for example, "my government does not really care" (Brainard, 2016). This lack of trust will make it harder to implement policy and provide services.

The lack of research in this area is also of concern. Agencies should be questioned on how and why they choose to use technology as they do. A study of actual agency policy may also be in order. Further, we need to question what "citizen experience" would look like, why do citizens look at social media sites, and how do citizens view responses or lack thereof from these agencies. There are many areas of this issue that have yet to be addressed. Maybe once administrators have better educated themselves on these matters, they will be in a better position to answer whether social media sites promote civic engagement.

## REACHING THE MASSES

While surveys show that there are a high number of people utilizing social media, not everyone uses the internet. A 2016 Pew Research Article reveals that thirteen percent of Americans do not utilize the information highway compared to that of twenty-four



percent of nonusers just three years ago. Of these individuals, thirty-four percent are not interested or do not feel that it is of any relevance to them; thirty-two percent feel that they do not possess the abilities to navigate the web; eight percent state that they are limited by their old age; and nineteen percent cannot afford web access or the hardware necessary to connect (Anderson, 2016). These are the people that organizations should immediately think of when discussing access. However, there are other groups that agencies should also take a look at.

Those individuals who live in rural communities where internet service is not good or does not exist do not experience social networking the same as those who live in urban areas where signal is plentiful. It has been found that government agencies in metropolitan areas are more likely to have some type of online presence versus those in agricultural areas (Cassell, Mullaly, 2012).

Another limiting factor is that of education. The higher the education of the resident has a direct impact on the likelihood of local government agencies having some type of internet presence (Cassell, Mullaly, 2012).

The most obvious of those that might experience discrimination are those with actual disabilities. Technology can be a beacon of hope to those who are unable to get to places such as school or work, or who are unable to complete the simple task of running errands as they are not as mobile as individuals without disabilities. Technology opens a new door for them to be able to extend their education, find online work and potentially engage in government policy collaboration. However, this same beacon can also be another limitation to them if those that are disabled do not know that online access exists or lack the knowledge to use programs (Raja, 2016).

With the number of public organizations who are using social media as a means to reach their stakeholders, it is more important than ever to include those with disabilities. 36 CFR parts 1193 and 1194 are dedicated to ensuring that the disabled will have the knowledge to use and access to those technologies used to communicate and inform. However, please note that this particular Code of Federal Regulations does not have to be complied with until the 18th day of January, 2018. This is yet more evidence that our laws are still catching up with technology in regard to government use of technology.

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

To have a better understanding of whether civic engagement is being obtained through social media there needs to be an analysis of what is currently taking place on these types of social networking platforms.

This review of interactions should reveal a conversation between the entity and the citizen or the lack thereof. A back and forth interaction indicates that citizens are engaging the government organization. A lack of this type of interaction would indicate that citizens and/or the entity itself views the use of social media as a means to disburse information.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH

The entities contacted to participate in the survey are all within the City of Danville, Boyle County, Kentucky. Those entities are the City of Danville, Danville Police Department, Boyle County Sheriff, Boyle County Library, and The Heart of Danville. Each agency has at least a Facebook page which is where I will focus my analysis. Each organization was contacted to determine the individual who is responsible for maintaining, monitoring, posting and responding to comments on their Facebook page. I then contacted each individual to verify that each would be willing to fill out the survey and be open to any follow up questions I may have (Table 1).

Table 1. Results from Social Media Survey

	Heart of Danville	Danville Police	Boyle Co. Library	Boyle Co. Sheriff	City of Danville
Use of Facebook?	Yes	Yes	Yes	no response	no response
Do you track activity on your social media site	No	Yes	No	no response	no response
Strategy for Use of Social Media?	No	No	No	no response	no response
Formal Procedure for Response?	No	No	No	no response	no response
Do you feel social media is resulting in community participation?	Yes	Yes	Yes	no response	no response

Note. Data obtained from the survey attached hereto as Appendix I. Surveys were given to each entity contact person. Although multiple follow-ups in the form of telephone calls and emails were made, no response has been received from the Boyle County Sheriff and the City of Danville.

Results from Social Media Survey (Table 1) reveals that all agencies are utilizing, at least, Facebook to engage their stakeholders. This social media platform is ideal for two sided communications with citizens.

However, only one of the respondents actually tracks the number of responses received. The necessity of tracking the number of “likes” and/or “comments” is necessary to try and gauge the number of citizens being reached. Further, a “like” (or in the alternative an angry face emoji) can be a good indicator of whether or not the public approves or disapproves of the steps being taken by your agency. Although this form of communication through the site is a good indicator, “comments” are even better. Each comment could represent an opportunity to engage in a conversation with a stakeholder to help spur civic participation. Do note that while The Danville Police Department states that they track activity on their site, they averaged a reply rate of .56% response. See Table 6. It is understood that not all comments will warrant a response, but collectively these agencies do not seem to be engaging their citizens but rather are giving them bits of information.

Another indication that these Facebook pages are merely informational is their response to whether or not they have a strategy in place for their use of social media. Not one of these agencies has any type of strategy in place. This would seem to indicate that any responses that they are credited with are merely a quirk rather than a strategic review and response to a stakeholder’s comment.

As noted above, not one of the agencies appears to have any type of procedure in place to respond to citizens. Should the agencies have had some type of policy regarding the use of social media in place, this policy should mirror the organization’s strategy for utilizing social media to instigate civic participation. Of course, any policy of this type would mirror the organization’s strategy for utilizing social media to instigate civic participation.

Most curious to me is that although none of these agencies have strategy or policy in place to actively cultivate citizen participation, each feels that their use of social media is resulting in civic participation. This issue would be one that would warrant some additional research of a larger sample group to include follow-up questions and interviews regarding how agencies view participation.

As these local government entities are not tracking all of the activity on their Facebook page, an accounting and analysis of their Facebook activity was made for the months of August and September, 2017 (Table 2).

Although there is very little in the way of guidelines on analyzing government agencies according to response, a presumption can be made that a “like” is a way to say “I agree” or “good job”.

A “share” is an effort of a stakeholder to show others what you have done, for better or worse. Sharing should be an encouraged act. By a citizen sharing your posts, you are reaching more stakeholders and/or potentially other agencies which could reach out to collaborate towards garnering civic participation.

“Comments”, can be good, bad or indifferent. Not all comments require response or should be reviewed to garner if it is a question, concern or idea.

“Reply”. Those comments that raise an issue or make a suggestion should be replied to, although it may be just as important to respond to the occasional accolade with an expression of gratitude. This may garner just as much good will as addressing issues as it shows the citizen that their opinion of the organization matters. This could also be accomplished by “liking” their “comment”.

Table 2: Facebook activity for each agency from Aug. 1, 2017 to Sept. 30, 2017

	Posts	Likes	Shares	Comments	Replies
Heart of Danville	62	1239	220	120	3
Boyle County Sheriff	9	1613	563	94	2
Danville Police Dept.	32	1537	1796	354	2
Boyle County Library	45	242	54	20	4
City of Danville	32	138	44	5	1

Note: This data was obtained from the Facebook page of each entity.

When applying this analysis to the data obtained from each agency's Facebook page, it seems as if these sites are merely a tool to disseminate information rather than to spur participation as suggested in their survey responses.

The Boyle County Library has the highest reply rate, that of one of five. That is to say that, on average, they are replying to one of every five comments. City of Danville appears to have the same rate of reply. Even responding to one out of five seems to fall flat when taking into account the number of opportunities missed to engage a citizen and each organization's lack of strategy and/or policy.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The use of social media sites, specifically Facebook, to promote civic participation requires a two-sided communication between the agency and the citizen. The local agencies in Boyle County are not using their Facebook pages in this manner. The result is that these agencies are using their social media sites to make announcements and post information.

Further, no agency was found to be capturing the data created by their social media activity. Data from social media sites must be tracked to give insight into whether or not stakeholders are utilizing the site, how the citizen feels about the entity and what the entity should continue to do the same and what considerations should be made in future policy making or change.

Finally, the lack of strategy and/or policy regarding the use of social media lends to the conclusion that these agencies are merely toying with the use of social media rather than fully utilizing it as a tool of civic engagement.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of social media by government organizations is in an effort to instigate or increase civic participation. The participation will foster transparency, policy development and trust between the entity and its citizenry. This is done by talking with citizens, not at them. A two-way communication, through social media or otherwise, is necessary to have any type of successful interaction.

This research focused on local government entities from Boyle County, Kentucky, but they are not the only ones that are struggling to make social media work for them. Unfortunately the survey review revealed that local Boyle County entities believe that they are spurring civic participation but have no data to support that conclusion. This feeds into the contrasting opinions as to whether or not social media can spur civic participation, which is evident in the literature. The review of literature for this paper suggests that social media is one way of engaging citizens input, but as a stand alone strategy or tool, there are a lot of unanswered questions with regard to effectiveness. The research conducted of Boyle County entities resulted in a limited convenience sample of respondents that did not capture enough qualitative data on why these participants feel social media was increasing community participation. More research needs to be conducted with regard to the impact of social media on civic participation. This research would potentially include a larger sample and employ follow-up questions or interviews with the respondents in this regard.

Regardless of the various schools of thought, many entities will continue to utilize social media as a tool, with little thought given to benchmarks or desired outcomes by city officials. As a result entities are not spending the time or resources needed to actually assess the use of social media in any meaningful way where it improves city engagement. If this is the case, a professionally designed website may be a better option for engaging citizens, one that may include some type of service or newsfeed. Should this be their choice, a more traditional means of instigating civic engagement should be

used, such as newsletters, community hall meetings, or city events. These avenues will continue to be important to ensure civic engagement is being addressed.

If entities continue to utilize social media a ground up position may be the best one to take. That is to say that change should start in the classroom not just in universities but also through training sessions and materials from governing entities or even nonprofit organizations that assist administrators in matters of policy. This curriculum should include items such as dealing with cost, appropriate internet etiquette, reaching those with disabilities, and cyber security. In addition, more specific guidelines should be developed for the actual use of social media. This exploratory study, taken together with an initial investigation of the literature on social media, suggests the following guidelines should be utilized in the use of social media to instigate citizen engagement.

In using social media as a catalyst for building a relationship with stakeholders, there are three guidelines that agencies should follow. They are: (1) a post should be a reflection of the organization as well as a type of campaign to bring your audience in; (2) responses such as “comment” and/or “likes” should be reviewed and discussed with the proper authority within the organization; and (3) an analysis of stakeholder responses (comments/likes) should be conducted and based on their content, replied to. This last item is essential. (EPA, 2017) An organization can make the appropriate posts and collect data regarding responses on a daily basis but if there is no reply from the organization to the citizen regarding what steps are being taken, why steps cannot be taken, or a simple thank you for the feedback, then the organization has failed in the basic understanding of communicating with their citizens.

However, even if an organization does follow all of these steps, that does not necessarily mean that they are promoting civil engagement. In review of merely the use of Facebook and its resulting data, one cannot glean if that constitutes civic participation. That is a larger question that will require additional data. This exploratory study suggests that the use of social media does warrant more investigation into its effectiveness to spur community engagement.

Recommendations for future studies would include a more formal survey to include semi-structured interviews with the administrators of the social media or



websites. This study would then review the procedures put in place and how each group interacts with citizens. The final step would be to follow up with those citizens who utilize social media to interact with government agencies and if that interaction resulted in some type of participation on behalf of the citizen.

Again, the literature and research into the use of social media to engage the public is small. Further studies into the area should be made if government entities are going to continue to utilize social media to promote civic engagement.

In summary, civic participation is of the highest importance to any organization. Participation enables agencies to obtain what is most needed by its recipients and garners trust. Organizations should obtain and utilize stakeholder feedback when developing and instituting policy. Social media platforms provide a simple avenue for citizen feedback. Government agencies just need to learn how to make the most of this tool.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**Social Media Administrator Survey**

Christina Cummings  
Thesis Questionnaire/Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) Does your agency have a goal in working with social media sites (SMS)? If so, what is that goal? Is it short or long term in nature?

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- 2) Do you collect and analyze the suggestions or comments made by citizens? If so, is any action taken on the suggestions or comments?

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- 3) Does your agency have a strategy for promoting eParticipation?

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- 4) What forms of social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) does your agency utilize?

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- 5) Do your social media sites link back or link forward to your agency's web page?

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6) How often do you publish/post on these social media sites? If more than one site please answer for each site.

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7) How many followers/subscribers do you have? If more than one site please answer for each site.

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8) How many "likes" and/or "reposts" did you average per month in 2016? If more than one site please answer for each site.

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10) How long has your agency had a social media presence?

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11) Do they utilize the site to allow or give direction on signing up for services?

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12) Do you believe that the use of social media sites has improved or increased citizen involvement?

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